



Relief for Property Taxpayers

I am very pleased to report that the regional economic outlook is improving and that our local economy is solid. Jobs are being created, our unemployment rate is low and tax receipts are coming in strong.

However, one indicator of a strong economy is rising property values ... and that means rising assessments. As a homeowner in Montgomery County, I can personally attest to the impact these increases have on the family budget.

The County's Fiscal Year '05 Budget does provide some relief in the form of a reduction of in the property tax rate, which translates into a \$10.8 million cut in property taxes for local homeowners.

And for property taxpayers living on fixed or moderate incomes, additional relief may be available through the Homeowners Property Tax Credit Program, designed to reduce one's overall property tax burden.

Under this program – which is administered by the State of Maryland – homeowners whose income falls below specific levels receive a credit that reimburses a portion of their County property tax. The amount of credit is based on the income of the taxpayer in relation to the property tax that the person would pay in any given year. As the taxpayer's income rises, the amount of credit will taper off.

I encourage all who qualify to check out the program. Being able to save money on your taxes is certainly worth the small amount of time it will take to get the facts on the Homeowners Property Tax Credit program. Just call 1-800-944-7403 or visit www.dat.state.md.us/sdatweb/htc.html.

Tops in the Country for Farmland Preservation

A recent national survey published in the July-August issue of Farmland Preservation Report, ranks Montgomery County first in the country in preserving farmland, with 61,000 acres being saved from development.

Many people recognize that the County is the ideal location for technology industries, the arts and entertainment industry, and almost any other industry sector you can name. But, many people may not be aware of the fact that

Montgomery County continues to be home to a thriving agricultural industry that contributes more than \$251 million a year to the local economy.

Our various farmland preservation programs are integral to the County's public land use policy and key to the continued viability of our agricultural industry. Regardless of what part of the county we live in, we all benefit from agricultural preservation – whether we buy fresh, locally grown products or appreciate the serenity of a scenic, rural vista.

In response to the threat of encroaching development, we have embarked on a more aggressive campaign to preserve agricultural lands. To this end, we've modified the formula used to calculate easements, so we're more competitive with other easement programs that reflect rising land values. This should help spark further interest from landholders since we can offer substantially higher easement values and be competitive with the real estate market.

Our efforts, however, are being negatively impacted because the State has reduced funding for Program Open Space and agricultural preservation by \$115 million. We will fail in our efforts to prevent sprawl if we do not have the full support of the State, and I will be fighting in Annapolis to have these funds restored.

Support for Small and Minority Businesses

Our Small and Minority Business Retention Task Force continues to proactively reach out to the small and minority business community in Silver Spring. The effects of the redevelopment project have exceeded our wildest expectations and we want to do everything we can to ensure that those businesses that were there in the tough times can now enjoy the good times.

The Task Force recently visited more than two dozen businesses in Silver Spring to educate them on the retention initiatives offered by the County and its partners.

In addition to the County's Department of Economic Development, other organizations participating in the outreach were the Greater Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce, the Silver Spring Regional Services Center, the



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County's Department of Housing and Community Affairs, the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Maryland Small Business Development Center Network.

I have appointed a small and minority business liaison to work full-time in Silver Spring to assist those who need help adjusting to the strengthened business climate in Downtown Silver Spring. For more information on how to receive assistance, contact Alvaro (Al) DeMoya at 301-787-3979 or DeVance Walker at 301-943-9769.

New Protection for Cable Modem Customers

I am proud of the fact that Montgomery County has become the first local jurisdiction in the country to enact regulations that will provide protections to cable modem customers similar to those available to cable TV subscribers.

The new regulations will offer a new standard of excellence in customer service for our residents who choose to receive their modem service from cable companies. Once again, Montgomery County has become a national leader in consumer affairs.

Spanish Language Textbooks for Students

I was recently honored to join Montgomery County Public Libraries Director Harriet Henderson to accept a donation of Spanish language textbooks for our public library system from the Mexican Embassy Consular Section and the Institute for Mexicans Residing Abroad.

The generous donation will not only provide opportunities for many students but will allow parents, caregivers and teachers ready access to the materials so they can share in the learning experience. This was a very kind gesture given in return for the County's allowing the use of the Consular Identification Card as an appropriate form of identification for Mexican residents living in the county.

The books are designed for use by first through sixth graders and cover topics such as science, math, geography, and Spanish, plus activity books for first- and second-graders.

Code Red Days are for Using Transit

As we all know, August in our area can provide some of the hottest, steamiest days of the summer season, which means we could still experience some Code Red days when the air quality is unhealthy.

I want to remind everyone that we offer free Ride On bus rides whenever a Code Red day is designated by the Council of Governments and were the first jurisdiction in the Washington, DC area to do so.

But free bus rides aren't the only measures Montgomery County undertakes to help reduce the emission of smog-forming chemicals. We refuel County vehicles after dusk, curtail mowing, median strip spraying, asphalt paving and center line painting.

Residents can also help by carpooling, telecommuting or using mass transit, refueling after dark and postponing lawn and garden chores that use gasoline-powered equipment.

Fun, Education and Entertainment for the Entire Family

For nearly 60 years, the Montgomery County Agricultural Fair – the largest county fair in the State of Maryland -- has showcased the best that our agricultural community has to offer.

The theme this year – "It's a Family A-Fair!" – is especially appropriate because there is truly something at the Fair for everyone. The Fair, itself, is based on the family values that we treasure today, and we salute the men, women and children who have helped shape the event that is today, the largest County Fair in the State of Maryland.

I invite residents to make plans to attend the Fair that will be held this year from August 13 to 21 at the Fairgrounds in Gaithersburg. It's a chance to enjoy some good food and entertainment, see some educational exhibits and learn more about the people and products that have created such a strong, viable agricultural presence in Montgomery County. And, it's one of the best summertime bargains around.